

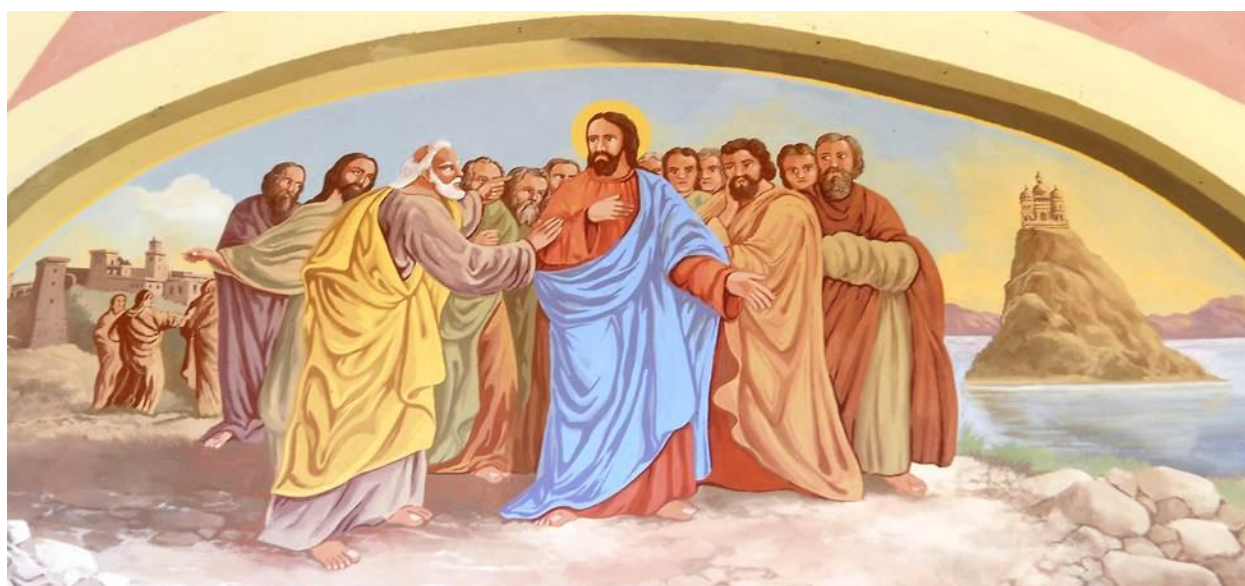


Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time | Year B



Jesus and his 12 disciples.

The painting on the wall of the church of St. Peter, [Malečnik](#), Maribor, Slovenija



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

(Found in your parish Sacramentary.)

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer for Generosity

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Eternal Word,

only begotten Son of God,

Teach me true generosity.

Teach me to serve you as you deserve.

To give without counting the cost,

To fight heedless of wounds,

To labor without seeking rest,

To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward

Save the knowledge that I have done your will.

Amen.

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**

Version 2.0

© Mary Birmingham,
2011. All rights reserved.

Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

Liturgical Context

The end of the liturgical year is fast approaching. With the end in sight our attention focuses on the culmination of Jesus' ministry.

- ▶ Today Jesus is in conversation with a scribe who asks Jesus what must be done to insure salvation. Jesus presents his wonderful teaching of the Two Great Commandments.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

First Reading: Deuteronomy 6: 2-6

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ Moses presents the Law of love and exhorts the people to follow God's statutes. Jesus, the new Moses echoes Moses in today's Gospel as he presents his catechism on salvation.
- ▶ Today's reading reflects a prayer and ritual that is etched on the heart of every practicing Jewish person.
- ▶ It is the famous, *Sh'ma Isreal (Hear O Israel!)*
- ▶ It is a creedal formula and expression of deep faith.
- ▶ If a Jewish person was asked to describe his or her Jewish faith he or she would recite the Shema.
- ▶ Fervent, practicing Jews wear this prayer in a small vessel attached to their wrists and foreheads.
- ▶ A mezuzah containing the prayer is hung from the door frame of every home.
- ▶ Jews pray this prayer in the morning and at night.
- ▶ It summarizes their belief and worship of the One God of Israel.
- ▶ The prayer assumes that God revealed himself to humanity at the creation of the world and continues to be in loving, covenant relationship with his people throughout all of salvation history.
- ▶ God's revelation is evidenced in the Exodus event and in his presence in the one central sanctuary.
- ▶ The Shema affirms belief in the God who is in intimate, reciprocal relationship with his people.
- ▶ Heart, soul and strength are not separate realities—they form the one complete and total person—body, soul and spirit are one united reality.
- ▶ Unlike Greek dualism, Jewish theology affirms that matter is good and that body and soul are united—not separate. Matter and spirit are good, not evil.
- ▶ God's love is completely gratuitous, unmerited and unconditional.
- ▶ For so great a gift one can do no less than love God with heart, mind and soul.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News for us today in this reading?
- ▶ In what way are you able to relate this reading to your own life experience?
- ▶ Do you love God with your entire heart, mind and soul? What does that mean to you?
- ▶ What would you say if someone asked you to summarize your faith in God?
- ▶ How do you know that God loves you unconditionally? Is there any evidence in your life of that truth?

Second Reading: Hebrews 7: 23-28

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ The author continues his teaching on the High Priesthood of Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus is not only qualified to be High Priest, he surpasses the Levitical High Priesthood altogether.
- ▶ Levitical priesthood is earthly and transitory. It will not last forever.
- ▶ Jesus' priesthood, on the other hand, is eternal and will last forever.
- ▶ Levitical priests are subject to death.
- ▶ Jesus is eternal.
- ▶ Levitical priests offered burnt sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people.
- ▶ Jesus offered the sacrifice of his life in atonement for the sins of all humankind.
- ▶ Just like the mysterious, eternal priest Melchisedek, Jesus' priesthood was also eternal and not appointed by any human institution as the Levitical priesthood was appointed.
- ▶ Jesus' sacrifice rendered all previous sacrifices obsolete.
- ▶ Burnt sacrifices were no longer needed as Jesus offered his life as the one sacrifice for all.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ In what way, if any, can you relate to the teaching in this reading?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that Jesus rendered all sacrifices obsolete?
- ▶ What does that mean for your faith in him?

Gospel: Mark 12: 28b-34

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

For those catechists who prefer an abbreviated interpretation of the Gospel refer to the bulleted points that follow and then choose questions for your reflection found at the end of end of the entire exegesis. (Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

Abbreviated treatment of the Gospel:

- ▶ The Roman rulers of Jesus' day oppressed the people; Jesus spoke out against the domination of Gentile powers. He was also aware, however, that oppression was not simply something of which Gentiles could be accused.
- ▶ Jesus chastised Jewish leadership (priests, elders, scribes and Pharisees) for similar oppression.
- ▶ While they did not oppress with the power, authority and tools of government, the power that enabled them to oppress was the Law.
- ▶ The Law consisted of the rules, guidelines and regulations set forth in the Torah and in the oral tradition.
- ▶ Pharisees considered the oral word to carry as much weight as the written word—both were believed to be God's divine revelation.
- ▶ The rules set forth could be extremely burdensome to the people. Regulations existed for every circumstance of daily life—religious as well as ordinary life.
- ▶ Jesus railed against the way in which the law was used to place burdens on people's backs.
- ▶ The Pharisees turned the Law into a *burden* for people rather than the *service* for which it was intended. ("The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Mk 2:27.) How absurd it was that healing a sick person on the Sabbath

was unlawful!

- ▶ Pharisees understood the Law to be punitive—a yoke. The Law was used against people, not for them. Jesus understood the Law differently.
- ▶ The Law was established for the good and well-being of the people.
- ▶ Scribes, elders and Pharisees' approach to the Law was literalistic, hypocritical and legalistic.
- ▶ Jesus' approach was merciful and compassionate. Jesus' stance was permissiveness when the needs of people were in jeopardy as a result of its observance and strict adherence when that was in the best interest of the people.
- ▶ Jesus' approach was pastoral. People were at the heart of his attitude toward the Law.
- ▶ The bottom line? The Law was made to help people, not hurt them.
- ▶ The Sabbath rules were made to help people—to give them a rest from hard labor.
- ▶ They were not meant to prevent people from helping others or to keep people from eating when they were hungry, or to pick a fruit from a tree or a vegetable from a garden to feed a hungry stranger.
- ▶ Jesus did not want to be trapped into debate over the details of Law.
- ▶ Jesus was not objecting to the written or oral law; he was not proposing a less strict interpretation. He was simply objecting to the *way* in which the Law was used to hurt people, burden them and make their already difficult lives more difficult.
- ▶ Jesus was not anti-Law. He was not trying to abolish the Law of Moses or set up a new system of Laws. He was not subtracting from or adding to existing laws.
- ▶ He came to fulfill the Law—to see that it was used the way God intended the Law to be used. Jesus wanted the Law to achieve the purpose for which God created it.
- ▶ God created the Law in order to promote love, service and compassion toward one another. God's mercy was and is communicated in and through the Law.
- ▶ Undue attention given to issues of *clean* and *unclean* was a distraction from honest discernment into the hearts of people who wished harm, not good, upon others.
- ▶ Scribes and Pharisees had forgotten God's primary purpose for the Law; they turned it into an oppressive, authoritarian tool used to hurt people—not help them.
- ▶ The leaders were slaves to the Law, thus exalting their own importance. They lorded it over those who were not as observant as they were.
- ▶ Such self-importance gives a false sense of security. It is sometimes easier to do what others tell us to do than to take personal responsibility for our own actions.
- ▶ It is sometimes easier to blindly follow an oppressive law than it is to listen to God's will. People sometimes **want** to be enslaved by the Law.
- ▶ When that happens, such people try to enslave others, making sure that everyone else is as enslaved to the Law as they are.
- ▶ The usual victims of this enslavement are the poor and marginalized members of society.

- ▶ Jesus wanted to liberate everyone from undue bondage to the Law. He could not do this by eliminating it; he had to take it down off of the pedestal. He had to make it our servant rather than our master.
- ▶ In today's Gospel Jesus defined the true meaning of the Law he set out to dethrone.
- ▶ The true purpose of the Law is love of God, love of self and love of neighbor. Anything else is nothing but fluff and commentary. To impose any other purpose for the law is to rob God's original intention for it as an instrument of love, peace and betterment for the children he created.

This brings the abbreviated interpretation to a close. Refer to the questions at the end of the entire exegesis and choose the appropriate questions for your reflection.

Further elaboration of the Gospel:

The following exegesis is provided for your further and continued reflection.

- ▶ In addition to the above material there are several other interesting elements in this Gospel for our reflection.
- ▶ Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. The drama is building.
- ▶ A scribe asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment.
- ▶ Jesus refers him to the beloved *Shema* of Judaism (see first reading). He adds his own elaboration of the prayer, however.
- ▶ Jesus for the first time places love of neighbor on a par with loving God.
- ▶ Love of neighbors comes out of our love for God.
- ▶ For the Israelite *neighbor* meant just that—one's proximate neighbor, friend, countrymen, and relative—other Jews.
- ▶ Jesus' message was revolutionary. Neighbor included everyone in the human race—anyone in need of our help—especially the ones who needed it the most.
- ▶ Scribes were not formally educated. They were charged with the duty of passing on the oral tradition so people could be exhorted to live by the precepts of the Torah.
- ▶ They taught and interpreted the Torah so that actions, attitudes and behaviors of the people could be regulated and controlled.
- ▶ Today's encounter is not an adversarial encounter. The scribe in question was simply asking the question asked by all teachers of the law in every generation. Jesus answered it without equivocation.
- ▶ What was remarkable in Jesus' teaching is that he took a law considered to be of higher authority (love of God) and made it equal with a law considered to be of lesser authority (love of neighbor), thus illustrating the importance of the latter.
- ▶ Our love of God is tested and discerned by the way in which we love our neighbor.
- ▶ The scribe answered correctly and told Jesus that love of God and love of neighbor is more important than the Jewish worship of burnt offerings and sacrifices.
- ▶ Jesus affirmed the man and told him that he was close to God's reign.
- ▶ Jesus bestowed public honor on the scribe by his affirmation of him.
- ▶ This is Jesus' last encounter with the scribes and elders before his execution.
- ▶ Mark lets us know that no one could enter into debate with Jesus and win.
- ▶ They were simply no match for him.
- ▶ He was a brilliant orator, debater and his intellect and wisdom were beyond measure.

- ▶ Jesus was a herald of the new kingdom in which the poor would have an exalted place.
- ▶ Jesus illustrated the extent to which love can go and is called to go—self-sacrifice flowing out of love for God and others.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to ONE or MORE appropriate questions (as time allows) in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface their insights in the wider group. Catechist responds by sharing his or her own experience. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the Good News in the Gospel?
- ▶ What is the lesson in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does being a slave to the law mean to you?
- ▶ Do you know of anyone who is a slave to the law? What are the implications of this enslavement?
- ▶ Have you ever been enslaved by the law? Explain.
- ▶ Why is this something that easily happens to us?
- ▶ Was Jesus against laws? What was his attitude toward law?
- ▶ “People sometimes want to be enslaved by the Law.” What does this statement mean to you? Why would anyone want to be enslaved by the law?
- ▶ What does it mean to love God with your whole heart, your whole mind and your whole soul and to love your neighbor as yourself? If someone asked you what that meant what would you tell them?
- ▶ In what way do you love God with your whole heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself? Is there evidence of this love in your life?
- ▶ How does this Gospel speak to your life right now?
- ▶ Who in your life is God calling you to love as it is described in this Gospel?
- ▶ If our love of God is tested by the way in which we love our neighbor, what evidence is there in your life that you love your neighbor? How do you love ALL your neighbors—the human community? If your love of God were judged by the way in which you love Muslims, how would you be judged?
- ▶ In what way did Jesus take the Law down from the pedestal and make it our servant rather than our master? Did we learn much from him or do we still put the Law on the pedestal? Is your understanding of the Law on a pedestal? If so what can you do about it?

Catechist invites participants to reflect on the following question in the group or in their journal.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Oblatio Sui

*Lord, take all my freedom.
Accept my memory,
my understanding,
And my entire will.
You have given me all that I have or hold dear.
I return it to you,
that it may be governed by your will.
Give me only your grace
and the gift of loving you,
And I will be rich enough;
I will ask for nothing more.
Amen.*

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

- *What does it mean to love God with your whole heart, your whole mind and your whole soul and to love your neighbor as yourself? If someone asked you what that meant what would you tell them?*

Jesus' exhortation to love is near and dear to my heart. This has been a year in which God has invited me deeper and deeper into communion with him. Day after day he asks me to let go of my life situation and fall through it to my real life—intimate union and communion with God.

I know that as I grow in that communion it has a discernible impact on my love of others. I recently have been nursing a hurtful wound imposed by an acquaintance. I have been asking God and the Spirit deep within if the love God shares with me is having an influence on the love and reconciliation I need to extend to this person who wounded me.

My reflection led me to acknowledge that indeed it is a slow process but I can honestly affirm that my love and by extension reconciliation of neighbor is flowing out of my love for God. My first inclination was to nurture the hurt and let it fester to the point of imagining my responses to this person should I have an encounter.

I can see the growth in my life. There was a time I would have nurtured such hurt for endless days. I have noticed of late that rage, anger and hurt have simply melted away and my animosity toward the offending party has vanished.

Intimacy with God cannot co-exist with hatred, animosity and an unforgiving heart. Thus, I affirm Jesus' contention that love of God and love of neighbor are equal sides of the same coin. I thank him for this important lesson in my life.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 6: 2-6 | Hebrews 7: 23-28 | Mark 12: 28b-34

Creed
Morality
Moral Decision Making
Saints

Scripture and Revelation
Prayer
Liturgical Year
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CREED

The reading from Deuteronomy echoes the great prayer of Israel—the Shema. It is a profound expression of faith in God. If asked what they believe, all Jews' profession of faith would be the Shema. (Hear oh Israel!) Would that each and every one of us would recite the Creed if asked the same question. It is thus fitting that today we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the NICENE CREED.

MORALITY

The reading from Deuteronomy echoes the great prayer of Israel—the Shema—the great commandments—love of God and neighbor. The two Great Commandments sum up the moral life. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MORALITY.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

The reading from Deuteronomy echoes the great prayer of Israel—the Shema—the great commandments—love of God and neighbor. The two Great Commandments sum up the moral life. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about MORAL DECISION MAKING.

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

In today's Gospel Jesus challenges strict and narrow interpretation of the Torah. Religious authorities interpreted the Torah in such a way that it created severe burdens for the people who desired to live according to the Law. Jesus constantly set out to remove such burdens and barriers that kept people from access with God. This issue still exists today. Some people still narrowly interpret the Scriptures. It thus behooves us to understand

how our faith tradition approaches the Bible. It is thus fitting that today we focus our attention on **SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION**.

SAINTS

In these last days of the liturgical cycle we focus on the communion of saints—the saints on earth and the saints in heaven that share the eschatological banquet in the Eucharist. November first is the Feast of All Saints. During this latter part of the liturgical cycle we focus our attention on the communion of saints and those who have gone before us. It is thus a proper time for us to focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about the **SAINTS**.

PRAYER

Jesus speaks of the Great Commandments that call us to love God and neighbor with heart and soul. We are strengthened in that effort through a fervent call to prayer. Prayer invites us into intimate union with God; thus without prayer it is impossible to love God with one's entire being. It is thus fitting that today's doctrinal session focuses on **PRAYER**.

LITURGICAL YEAR

Any Sunday of the year is an appropriate time to reflect on the cycle of the Church year. Every Sunday is a most appropriate time to address what we celebrate in the unfolding liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. As the present Church year is winding down and a new year is soon to begin, it is appropriate that we address what the Church teaches about the **LITURGICAL YEAR**.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. This week we continue the series on the Mass. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.